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ABSTRACT

Negotiation of syllabus design and content in college-level business English is discussed, looking at three types: negotiation between teachers of business English, between teachers and students of business English, and between business English and content-area business teachers. Examples of practice from the Chinese University of Hong Kong are cited. It is argued that of the three types, agreement is most easily achieved between the business English teachers and the content-based teachers. Negotiation between business English teachers, while seemingly least problematic, may arise from conflicts in teaching experience, personalities, and preferred materials and methodologies. Negotiation between teachers and students is criticized by some because students may not always know what they need to learn; others feel it may enhance students' sense of involvement and personal development. A survey of 189 students in the Chinese University of Hong Kong's English Language Teaching Unit revealed some commonalities and some surprises in course content preferences. The top first three choices of the students in terms of perceived usefulness to them were job interviews, presentation skills, and writing application letters. Some surprising results among the items given lower rank-ordering were the rank order given to curriculum, vitae/resume writing, negotiations, and memo writing skills and telephone skills. Syllabus negotiation between business English and business teachers is seen as important because the former know which aspects of language are required for the discipline and the latter assure that learning activities are appropriate. Contains 5 references. (MSE)

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Negotiated Syllabus in EAP Business English Courses

How far can negotiation be realised in practice when designing a syllabus? This article deals with syllabus negotiation within a university setting: first, among teachers of business English; second, between teachers and students of business English; and third, between business English teachers and content-based teachers from the faculty of business. This paper also hopes to illustrate that of the three types of negotiations cited, agreement is most easily achieved between the business English teachers and content-based teachers.

The notion of syllabus and negotiated syllabus

There are different approaches to syllabus design. Nunan (1988) sees syllabus design "as being concerned essentially with the selection and grading of content". Others, like Candlin (1984) claim that content and tasks (or methodologies) cannot be easily separated. Widdowson, on the other hand, believes that a syllabus is "a framework within which activities can be carried out; a teaching device to facilitate learning". H.H. Stern (1984), on the other hand, defined syllabus as "a statement of the subject matter, topics, or areas to be covered by the course leading to the

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particular examinations". Though there are different aspects, then, to syllabus design, this article will deal solely with course content.

Is some form of negotiation desirable when designing a syllabus? Perhaps not only desirable but necessary when two or more teachers are involved in teaching the same course. In fact, the more teachers there are teaching the course, the greater is the need for negotiation. The students' needs and interests, the content of the course, and the resources available are only some of the bases of negotiations and establishing a consensus of principles and actions becomes an integral part of it.

Yalden (1987) referred to the triangular, interactive relationships between the linguist, the learner and the teacher - although a dual interactive relationship could also be established between language teachers and students, in cases where the language teachers also serve as the linguists. Further, she advocated discussion and negotiation as ways of gathering information and allowing learners to choose from among the needs of their whole class and to rank-order these needs as they feel.

Negotiation in practice

1. *Negotiation among business English teachers.* On the surface, this would seem to be the least problematic of all. Teachers know one another and they are aware of the language ability of their students. However, agreement among teachers cannot be easily presumed. Teachers normally put into their planning of courses, their teaching experiences, personalities and preferred materials and methodologies. These inevitably lead to a longer negotiation process which may not necessarily result in mutual agreements. Sometimes, teachers end up preparing their own syllabuses and materials for the course.

In the English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU) at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, teachers discuss the objectives of the course and prioritise the core contents accordingly. During these deliberations, the nature of the business English course is examined, keeping in mind course duration (fourteen weeks, 2.5 hours/week). The core contents that have been agreed upon include letters of application, drafting curriculum vitae/resume, job interview practice, business letters, memos, reports, and presentation skills. With quite a number of items to consider, the timeframe for each content area is very tight. Because of this, questions are sometimes raised regarding the inclusion of application

letters, CVs and interview practice in the syllabus. These items are regarded by some teachers as outside the purview of a workplace-oriented business English course.

However, because business English courses are only offered as electives, these questions get overlooked all the time. The fact remains that job-search related communication skills are what attract many students to enrol in the course. For many, this course might be their only chance to get, among other things, some kind of job-search related practice in English.

When considering the advantages of negotiating syllabuses among teachers of the same course, it must be remembered that negotiation is useful for the sheer practical reason that students compare courses: the course content, number and types of assignments and means of assessment. This alone makes negotiation among teachers of the same course very important.

2. *Negotiation between teachers and students.* There are differing views about the wisdom of involving students in deciding the contents of a business English course. Some argue against it, based on their experience and knowledge of students. They think that students do not necessarily know

what they want nor what they need; that learners are often unclear about what they want from their studies. On the other hand, other teachers believe that for learning to be made meaningful, the students should have their own input into the content of the course. Business English students, in particular, have clearly defined occupational-related linguistic goals. There is also the added advantage of helping enhance students' personal development through negotiations.

"by sharing and negotiating power ... the learners could use and develop their existing experience, skills and knowledge as much as possible" (Parkinson & O'Sullivan. 1990).

In ELTU Business English courses, direct negotiation of course content hardly exists between students and teachers. Rather, course descriptions are printed in the University Student Handbooks which give students information about course content before they sign up for elective courses. The contents of the course, although not directly negotiated with students, are still very much based on their needs. For instance, there are regular end-of-term course evaluations by students when they are encouraged to comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the course. Also, from time to time, some teachers discuss the course openly with their students which also serve as opportunities for insightful comments and practical suggestions. In a way, if the

definition of *negotiation* can be stretched a bit, the end-of-term evaluations and open discussion of courses with students form the *negotiated* part of the course. And just as in the real business world, business English teachers have always to take into account market demand.

A second-level needs study was conducted among the ELTU Business English students at the start of term to ascertain their language priorities. A second-level needs study is the next stage after an initial needs analysis has been conducted. In this particular second-level survey, 189 students were asked to rank-order ten items in order of usefulness to them. The results of this survey were analysed in two ways: (Table 1) first choice only; and (Table 2) a combination of first three choices. This was done to make allowances for those respondents who were undecided about the ordering of their first three choices. Here are the results:

(Table 1) **First choice**

1 application letters	26%
2 presentation skills	24%
3 job interviews	16%
business letters	16%
4 negotiations	6%
reports	6%
5 CV/resume	5%
6 agenda/minutes	1%
7 telephone skills	0%
memo writing	0%

(Table 2) **First three choices**

1 job interviews	54%
presentation skills	54%
2 application letters	48%
3 business letters	37%
4 negotiations	33%
5 reports	29%
6 CV/resume	25%
7 telephone skills	10%
8 memo writing	5%
agenda/minutes	5%

It can be seen from the results that there was not much difference in the rank ordering of choices whether from the point of view of first choice only or a combination of first three choices. In both tables, the top first three choices of the students, in terms of perceived usefulness to them, were *job interviews, presentation skills and writing application letters.*

Top Three Choices

It was not surprising for *job interviews* and *application letters* to come first in the top three of both tables. There has been an increase in the number of university graduates in Hong Kong and the competition for jobs is getting tighter. A well-written application letter is important and a number of job interviews for middle management jobs are conducted in English. For students who are not confident of their spoken and written English, the burden of finding a suitable job becomes even more daunting as, in fact, it already is.

Presentation skills as the second most popular choice comes as a bit of a surprise, since the classes are mostly made up of senior students. However, it was learned that their keenness to learn presentation skills was for both

academic and practical reasons. Most major courses require presentations of final term projects or of seminar papers. Also, in some job interviews, candidates are asked to give impromptu talks on given topics, perhaps to test not only their English skills but also their poise. Either way, students find skill in presentation a good one to develop.

Other choices

There were some surprising results among the items given lower rank-ordering. The rank order, for example, given to *curriculum vitae/resume* writing (no. 5 in table 1 and no. 6 in table 2) is puzzling. Whereas it might easily be presumed that it would occupy the same high rank as interviews and application letters (see table), in this survey it does not. There is an obvious conflict here between what students feel is a priority item and what business English teachers think they need. Teachers have always agreed that teaching CV/resume writing is extremely important for students. When students were asked about this, however, they stated that apart from the easy availability of published samples of CV/resume for reference, it does not in any case involve much writing. An important point for negotiation, therefore, is to make the students realise that careful preparation of a CV/resume is equally vital to getting job interviews. A look at the job requirements in

the classified ads page of daily newspapers, where copies of CV/resume are often demanded, would hopefully be enough to convince them of this fact.

Also interesting is the rank-order given to negotiations (no. 4 in both tables). Perhaps the reason for this is because negotiations are part of everyday life, especially in the business field, and students would like to learn the ways of winning negotiations early on in their business career.

Another interesting result is the low rank given to memo writing and telephone skills (no. 7 in table 1 and nos. 7/8 in table 2). It is possible perhaps that these rankings are based on students' personal assumptions of what skills might be important for them in the workplace. With regard to telephone skills, the result can be explained by the fact that many of the students think that English telephone skills are less important since Cantonese is in fact the language commonly used in business done over the telephone. (They have more anxiety about face-to-face contacts.) With regard to memo writing, their use within companies are not clear to students. They think that within a company, telephoning and personal contacts are the standard practices. Students have to be convinced, therefore, that

memos (either in conventional format, fax or e-mail form), are actually increasing common types of inter-office communication. Showing them samples of genuine office memos and course syllabuses from in-company English training programmes helps convince them of the necessity to learn effective memo writing.

The rank-order given to agenda/minutes of meeting (no. 6 in Table 1 and no.8 in Table 2) can well be expected. Most of the university meetings participated in by students are held in Cantonese. There is also a wide perception that in actual business world, Cantonese is always used and that the agenda and minutes of the meeting are the sole responsibilities of the secretarial staff.

The time to convert felt needs into real needs is at the beginning stage of teacher-student relationship. Brumfit (1984) and Widdowson (1984), however, both stress the importance for teachers at this initial to provide direction and to define the parameters in a class. Including memos in a syllabus is perhaps a good example of where teachers can make a unilateral decision, based on their own knowledge and experience. As always, the difficult question is: How far should language teachers negotiate the syllabus with their students? Experience, the particular teaching-learning

situation, the resources available, are all factors entering into this decision.

What then is the main advantage of a negotiated syllabus between students and teachers? Perhaps the biggest reason for negotiation is its positive effect on generating interest and motivation among the learners. If the students are made aware of the rationale of the course content and are consulted on the priorities of language skills to be learned, their interest in the course will surely be heightened.

3. *Negotiation between business English teachers and content-based teachers*

This is slightly different from the first two types of syllabus negotiation mentioned before. The business English courses, in this particular case, are funded by the business faculty in Chinese University which gives them a significant hand in deciding the content of the course. The negotiation process here is similar to in-company courses where, at times, employers define the language needs of their employees. In other words, the content of the course is decided upon by members of the Business department and the responsibilities of language teaching and methodology and production of appropriate course materials are taken on by

the ELTU business English teachers. And where are the students in these negotiations? Although not directly involved, their language needs are considered all the time - but only for those language needs which affect the academic requirements of the Business department.

What are the advantages of this type of negotiation between business faculty members and ELTU teachers? The input of content teachers is important and relevant especially in an academic community where the use of English is limited and sectionalised. They know what aspects of language they require and hope to see improved among their students. The language teachers, meanwhile, help by making sure that the activities in the class are geared towards achieving the objectives within the given timeframe and resources.

This article has concentrated on the advantages of negotiated syllabus especially when negotiations are practical and achievable. However, this is not to say that there are no disadvantages. For example, negotiating a course syllabus takes a lot of time and the results may not necessarily be practical and useful. Further, unless teachers have a great variety of materials ready to fit

particular course specifications of their students, it would be impossible to conduct any negotiations on course content.

Conclusion

This paper has dealt with the different aspects of negotiating a syllabus in a university setting. It has looked at the practicality of negotiation, first among the business English teachers; second, between the business English teachers and the students of business English; and third, between business English teachers and content-based teachers from the business faculty. It has been seen that negotiations among language teachers are perhaps the most sensitive to handle because each teacher brings his/her own personality, preference and experience to his/her own course. It is often not easy to arrive at a consensus. Although decisions might be reached eventually, the negotiating stage is longer and more lively, to say the least. Negotiation between business English teachers and their students have problems also, since the latter's language learning priorities may not necessarily be the same as their teachers'. Negotiation between business English teachers and content-based teachers looks the simplest because their relationship is clearly defined: that between the seller (the business English language teachers) and the buyer (the content-based business teachers).

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